

A TIGHT FIGHT FOR A TIGHT

BY EDWARD PEEPLE,
Author of "Prince Chap."

The particular trouble began on the English liner *Africa*, and was a personal question between a 351-made Kentuckian and a highly polished British nobleman.

Joe Rupert, the American, was a finely muscled specimen of manhood who had learned to ride and shoot and fight on the borders of western civilization. He now had settled down to the legitimate trade of raising horseflesh in the Blue Grass region of his native state. He had been to England with a large consignment of blooded stallions, and was returning, happy and at peace with all the world.

Lord Francis St. Agnew Whittemore, Earl of Cranton, was a most distinguished looking personage, slender and athletic, with a fashionably trimmed mustache, and a pair of eyes that were blue, his features regular, refined, yet marred by a dash of aristocratic scorn of the common herd.

The initial meeting between the Kentuckian and the Englishman was largely unfruitful. Lord Cranton was leaning gracefully against the rail, absorbed in the articles of a school of fish that seemed to be turning somersaults.

"There're percarates," he volunteered the Kentuckian, who was passing at the moment, and addressed his lordship in that free and easy camaraderie of ocean voyagers. "I seen 'em freckle when I fish come over, an' if you'll watch 'em long enough, you'll see 'em."

He raised abruptly for the Englishman was treating him to a stony stare of disapproval. The patrician nostrils were extended wide; the lips were curled, while the one anchored eyebrow not restricted by the crystal monocle was raised to its majestic height. For an instant he looked the American over from top to toe, then shrugged and turned his head away.

Joe dashed and walked away. The insult, though unmistakable, was not of a nature to warrant wringing the gentleman's neck, as much as he yearned to do so. True, the fault was all his own in speaking to an utter stranger, yet, moralize as he would, the nobleman's very presence on the ship was a sheep burr under a saddle flap. It galled Joe Rupert even to look at the Englishman's aggressive manner, and the long plaid greatcoat was another constant irritation, while the hideous plain cap to match was a thing which stirred him to the quick in his wrathful soul. Also, the occasional glance of contempt which Lord Cranton cast in his direction would cause his thoughts to wander to the Colt's .45 which seemed to burn in his pocket on his hip. Then the second meeting took place and bore more fruit.

The weather had roughened till the *Africa* rolled in the trough of a heavy sea like a drunken sailor. Nine-tenths of the passengers, who were scattered dead in their berths below, while the other tenth told among themselves and said that the trip was great. The Earl reclined in his stateroom chair, chatting with the captain, who had three burly officers when the Kentuckian chanced along. He was leaning toward the smoking room, and might have reached this point in safety had the *Africa* not given an unusually heavy pitch. Joe skidded, so to speak, clutched wildly at the nearest object of support, which, unfortunately, happened to be Lord Cranton's traveling cap, and, more unfortunately, a lock of hair beneath the luxurious mane of the Earl.

The occurrence was clearly accidental, and the Kentuckian was about to regain his feet and apologize, when his lordship scrambled furiously from his chair and kicked him hard.

Now to kick a native, free born American—especially when his back is turned—is the very quintessence of personal indignity. The Englishman had acted without a moment's thought, and he it was that he instantly regretted having thus demeaned himself. Joe Rupert also acted quickly—very quickly—not so much in thought as in that peculiar instinct engendered by a western code of raw morality. He achieved a short, half-strangled, blasphemous roar; a Colt's .45 took the center of the stage, and the captain, who struck desperately at the weapon, lost his cigar with a wind-match and a button from his handsome cap, as the bullet went zipping out to sea.

In an instant more there was a tangle of humanity on the slippery deck, Joe occupying a metaphorical lower berth, while the ship's officials formed a warm but unfruitful cordon. The one cool member of the company was mildred of Cranton, who by his cigar with a wind-match and a button from his handsome cap, as the bullet went zipping out to sea.

Following a period of intense activity, the American was secured by numerous flights of the lead-line, and was carried bodily into the captain's cabin as an unsympathetic member of a peace conference. Lord Cranton was also invited to attend, but the captive's general style of criticism made the august presence quite impossible.

The Earl, who was clearly in the wrong, wrote a note of dignified apology which the captain read aloud. Joe Rupert, calmer now, but still hot, handed and dictated the following dignified reply:

Sir—For pullin' of yo' hair I'm mighty sorry. I done it accidental. The kick you give me (not betin' by no means a lack of perite strictly) was an insult to the pride an' self-respect of any livin' gent'lman, an' as such I deman' the chanst of satisfaction now an' immediate, in any way what suits yo' self, sir, from this to rife.

Falling me in this, I swear to kick you twice or more, befo' the eyes of every man, lady an' child on bode, jes' as soon as they gets well enough to come up on deck, an' I'll be there. Your truly, JOSEPH RUPERT.

This challenge, after being read by the lordly principal, was crumpled and tossed with a careless shrug into the sea.

"What shall I tell him?" asked the waiting messenger.

"To go to the devil," suggested Lord Cranton, yawning lazily; so the messenger returned.

"I place you in fions for the balance of the voyage and hold you until Lord Cranton is on his way to Canada."

The Kentuckian thoughtfully considered this grim alternative. The threat of placing him in fions was of little moment; but the thought of not being present on the New York dock when his man landed was a dire calamity. "All right," he answered. "I'll promise you faithful to keep my fingers off the puppy's neck till we gets to land. An' all I ask of you is jes' two things. First, you got to make his lordships keep on the starboard side of this here boat, whilst scullie along on the port. The second one is that you give me an equul chanst with him to bolt across yo' gangplank. If that all right?"

Agreed, sighed the captain, but without a smile, and cut the prisoner's bonds.

Thus the trouble, for a time, was settled, the Englishman remaining on the *Africa*'s starboard side, while the American occupied the port, the latter stamping up and down in restless eagerness to land on freedom's shore and likewise on the point of a certain aristocratic jaw. Then another accident occurred.

On the third night the storm increased in violence, driving the steamer far out of her usual course, and in the morning there fell a fog so dense that Joe could scarcely see the bow of his comecop pile. All day long the wheelman groped his cautious way, while the passengers grew to loathe the leadman's droning cry and the rumbling scream of the *Africa*'s warning blasts. From away off somewhere came another hoarse monition of the deep, now near, now far, but from the fog grew thicker every minute.

Joe Rupert was leaning against the forward rail, watching for a glimpse of this other ocean wanderer, when suddenly his curiosity was more than satisfied. Like a great white duck, the United States warship dove from out the mist and buried its beak in the *Africa*'s big, fat flank. The steamer reeled beneath the shock, shuddered and heeled far over, while the rail on which the Kentuckian leaned was peeled away as by some giant's carving knife. Flung headlong into the sea, Joe swam with all his speed to avoid the toppling smokestack which seemed to be hunting for him in its fall; but by the grace of chance and the distance of half an inch he escaped unhurt.

At his hand was a splintered boom some eight feet long, with cordage and a tattered shroud attached, and on this Joe climbed to look about him. Some distance away he could dimly see the outlines of the two great ships still locked together, while on his ears fell a jumble of excited cries, the rasp of sharp commands through a naval megaphone, and the screams of women praying to be saved. Then came a new development. Through the breast of a huge green roller protruded a human hand, which the young Kentuckian seized and pulled with heroic power. His efforts bore rare fruit. From the water appeared a hideous plaid cap, and beneath it rose a crystal monocle still tightly affixed in a noble eye.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Joe, and assisted the balance of the stranger, who lord to a perch beside him on the boom.

"Thank you," began Lord Cranton when a mouthful of bitter water could be exchanged for speech. "Uncommonly decent of you, really, and I want to say—"

"Shut up!" commanded Joe, and his lordship tactfully obeyed.

In his rescue the American had lost his bearings, and the ships were no longer visible, while the sounds of tumult, though still in evidence, were less pronounced. This proved two facts. First, that the Kentuckian's passengers were being transferred to the battleship; second, that the castaways were drifting farther and farther from the hope of life.

For an hour the two men shouted, resolutely and in unison, but without results, while the fog grew thicker, mingling with the shades of night. At last a brisk wind rose, dispersing the mists and clearing a path for the glow of a million stars. A league to the north a flashlight beam the sea in sweeping circles, then winked away across the rim of cold, black waters. To the ship-recked travelers came the echoes of one hoarse, deafening shout, and then a comfortable battleship, and then they were left alone with the spirits of the clammy deep.

Joe observed the young Kentuckian in low-voiced fervor without result. "Right-o!" echoed the moist Lord Cranton from the other end of the wabbling boom, and a mutual silence fell between them.

Twas a splendid joke of fate, this flinging together of two erstwhile enemies, the patrician and plebeian, each seated a-straddle on his respective end of a floating timber, drifting to no-night. This lasted for several hours, when suddenly the Kentuckian's ear was caught by a sound which caused him to cock his head in the manner of a dog.

At first he was uncertain as to the cause, but the sounds became more distinct, and the faint but steady pounding of a sord could have but one meaning—land!

"Good!" Joe chuckled, and the shivering Briton echoed a faint yet cheerful "Jolly!"

Slowly they drifted toward a dry retreat, while the roll of the waves increased and mounted to an awful, thunderous roar. They swept past a spine of sharp, black rocks where the waters rushed, recoiled, and flung themselves on high, to fall in a spray of blinding foam. At last the boom came to rest on a sandy beach.

"What luck!" coughed the Englishman, kicking out his legs and wringing his hands in a ugly greatcoat. "Luck nuthin'" his fellow marooner growled. "It's Prov'y-dence, I tell you, an' a blame big chunk of it, at that. 'Twas the Gawd of Isruel what shoved me overboard, an' him what soused you in the drink beside of me. 'Cause why? Well, he sets me an' you on terra firmy jes' three durn days afore I thought he would."

The sentiment seemed justly pious, this following on the heels of a miraculous escape, and yet there was a certain grimness of delivery which caused the Englishman to doubt. This doubt, however, was speedily dispelled, for

Joe walked inland for a dozen yards or more and knelt on the soft white sand.

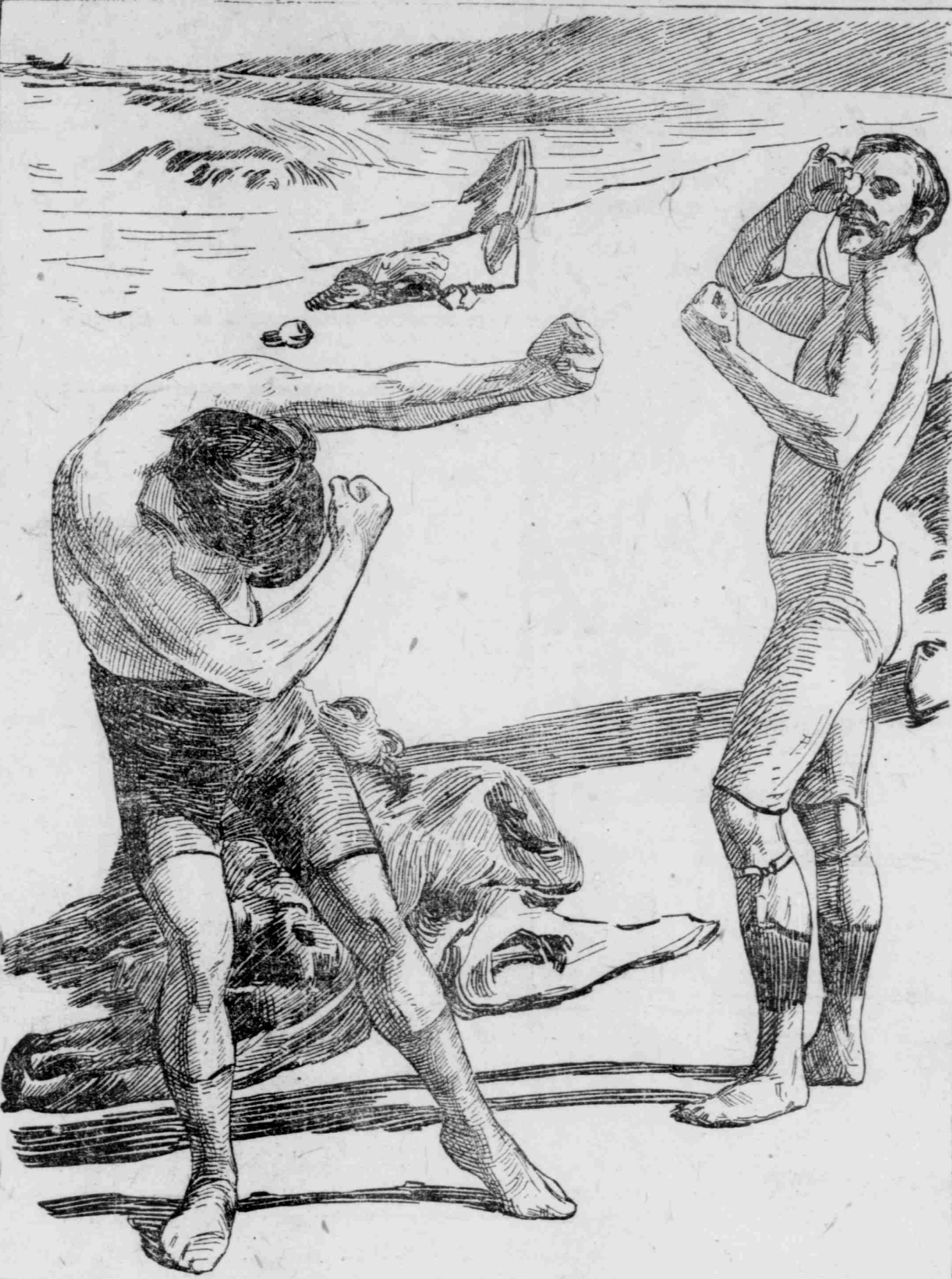
"Well, bless me, he's going to pray," Lord Cranton muttered reverently, removing his hideous plaid cap, then his mouth began to open slowly till his chin was resting on his wet cravat. Joe Rupert was digging a long and narrow hole, using his hands in the method employed by dogs which they scratch for amusement, or for some hidden animal.

"A most extraordinary chap," the Briton murmured, then conviction

vor not to be measured lightly, since it is not given to every man to perform a deed so clearly meritorious.

"Good morning!" he hailed, in a cheery shout, when the boat lay just beyond the line of breakers. A dash-lord was hopeful and would breakfast without the aid of the swinish barbarian who sipped hot coffee on the sands below. He filled his hideous plaid cap with gull's eggs, went scrambling the lumpy, breakneck path, and began to gather driftwood. He had no pot or kettle in which to boil the "bally things," but a roasted egg—unless it

they gave the Englishman a practical inspiration. "Eggs, by Jove!" he muttered joyously, and began to scale the cliff. A good, stiff climb it was, and one which added greatly to his appetite, but muddled, he was not to be deterred. A dash-lord was hopeful and would breakfast without the aid of the swinish barbarian who sipped hot coffee on the sands below. He filled his hideous plaid cap with gull's eggs, went scrambling the lumpy, breakneck path, and began to gather driftwood. He had no pot or kettle in which to boil the "bally things," but a roasted egg—unless it



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leaped upon him suddenly. "A grave, by Jove!" he whispered. "Crick! I might have known it."

The Earl was morally certain for whom this resting place was fashioned, especially so in view of the episode of the Kentuckian's big blue gun; still, not being the type of man to seek for safety by ignominious flight, he held his ground and watched the work with absorbing interest. True, his teeth were chattering somewhat, but the breeze from the sea was chilly and the hour was late. Then mildred received a second paralytic jolt. Mr. Rupert, having finished the grave to his evident satisfaction, rolled into it and began to heap the soft, warm sand upon his legs and body.

"For himself," gasped the British lord; then his look of horror changed into a smile, the smile into a grin, and the grin into a cackling laugh. It dawned upon him that this practical American, in the simplest and most practical manner possible, had merely gone to bed. So, chuckling to himself, Lord Cranton dug another hole and scooped the sand upon his participant in a sort of childish pleasure at the novelty.

"Jolly," he murmured, as the warm sand chased away the chill of night and the icy ooze of his sodden clothes. By Jove, that mad vulgarian was rather clever, after all.

In the morning Lord Cranton was awakened early by a bright sun shining in his face, by the roar of breakers and the sound of shrill, discordant cries. He remembered suddenly, and laughed. He scuffled from his temporary grave and found himself upon a tiny island. Before him lay a curving beach which ended abruptly at the south, while northward it rose in a rocky cliff where countless sea fowl screamed and wheeled above their nests. To the east was the sea, with huge green rollers beating upon the shore, and half a mile away on a spine of rock lay the battered *Africa*, deserted, half submerged, and keeling over upon her wounded side. And yet there was life on board. One man, half naked, was lowering a hamper into a boat, and soon he clambered down a rope himself and began to pull for shore. His lordship glanced at the open grave beside his own and drew conclusions. The American had swam to the wreck, collected a cook's supplies, and now was returning rapidly.

"Breakfast!" breathed the nobleman, with a bland, anticipatory smile. "Deuced decent of him, 'pon my word!"

With a sort of gnawing eagerness he watched the boat come bobbing across the waves, and at every stroke of the glistening oars his appetite increased. His judgment of the American had been misplaced, and like the man and the good it did a man who could not swim. The birds on the rocky cliff were screaming in derision of his plight, yet

explores or contains a very youthful fowl—is not to be despised.

His fuel arranged in a systematic pile, the genius felt for his match safe and found it filled, of course, not only with matches, but with a copious supply of nice salt water.

"If I had a club," he murmured soulfully, as one by one he hurled his eggs against a convenient stone. "I think I would have that disgusting pig on the top of his disgusting head."

Joe Rupert was not in the least responsible for the useless matches, but the Englishman was only human, and, besides, he was very hungry. He sat on the beach alone gazing sadly out to sea, while from afar he could sniff the aroma of boiling coffee and the fragrant smell of bacon that was fairly sizzling in the pan. And then, before his very eyes, the vulgarian was eating—actually eating—with a relish which drove another castaway to thoughts of a personal assault. He had battered about the world considerably, but never in his whole career had he stumbled across a man so totally devoid of crude humanity—a man who would gobble down a delicious breakfast and toss the crusts to fluttering water birds, when he, Francis St. Agnew Whittemore, Lord of Cranton, sat nursing his knees and pining for those very crusts. It was past belief!

Yet presently Joe Rupert finished eating, lit a cigar and reclined at ease; then, after a time, he once more set his foot to the beach.

"Well, dash his eyes, if he isn't going to eat again!" exclaimed Lord Cranton, furiously. "Oh, the glutton! The infernal box constrict!"

Joe, indeed, was preparing another breakfast, but when it was cooked he arose and strolled across to where the disconsolate lordling was sitting.

"Say, you," he began, informally, "yo' breakfast is ready, an' if you ain't too proud to eat without yo' flunk'y man, you can git it whilst it's hot."

Sir Francis stared at him in numbed astonishment, yet presently found his tongue.

"Look here," he spluttered, blushing in honest shame, "this is uncommonly handsome of you, and I've insulted you again—in thought. I owed you an apology before, but now—"

"Cut that!" commanded Joe. "You go on eat." He spun on his heel, paused, turned again and added grimly: "An' you better eat hearty, too, 'cause when you gets done I'm a-goin' to tell you sumthin' that'll make you set up an' think."

He strode away and left the marveling Englishman, who, believing his companion to be of unsettled mind, concluded to fortify himself with food, then wait for such developments as were sure to follow. He ate his breakfast and enjoyed it hugely, then, helping himself to a fine cigar which had come from *Africa*'s stock, he sprawled on the sand and waited. In the course of half

an hour the American returned. He looked at the empty plate, nodded complacently and took a seat.

"Now," said he, "as you've et yo' grub, we'll talk." His lordship waved his perfect gracefulness, and Joe continued: "The first day I spoke to you, civil an' gent'lmanly, you treat me like a nigger or a ki-yote. I let that pass, 'cause I oughtn't to have undid my lip; but when you riz up an' kicked me, you done a thing what makes a man see red an' forget the law. You give me two bruises, mister, one on my skin an' one on a white man's pride, an' now I'm a goin' to give 'em back."

"Wait," said Lord Cranton, flushing to his ears. "Aren't you a trifle rash? For my thoughtless act in booting you I wrote a full apology, and am now prepared to apologize again—profusely isn't that sufficient?"

"No," snapped Joe. "It ain't. You can do yo' apologizin' afterwards; but befo' you do it, I'm a goin' to give you the durndes' lickin' what you ever got sense me an' you was born."

A lump of anger rose in the Briton's throat, but in spite of it a look of admiration crept into his eyes.

"One moment," he parleyed. "Do you mean to say that it was your intention to thrash me from the first?" Joe nodded. "And you helped me up on the bit of wreckage and saved my life in order to carry out your extraordinary purpose?" Again Joe nodded, and the Briton's lips began to twitch into a smile. "Will you tell me," he asked, "why you did not polish me off when first we landed, or this morning before we breakfasted?"

"No," Joe answered, without apparent understanding of the situation's humor, "Ias' night you was wet an' cold; you want in no condition for a satisfactory fight, an' this mornin' we both was hungry. I had my breakfast, and might of punched you then, but I ain't the man to take advantage of a feller critter an' bloody his nose or a empty stomach."

Cranton's look of admiration visibly increased.

"By George, you're a brick," he laughed, "and as for your just desire to lick me, it's most unenviable in a gentleman to keep you waiting. He rose and began to divest himself of superfluous clothing, but paused at sudden thought, with his vest half off. "Look here," he said, "you've been a ripping chivalier in your code of honor, and I'm only fair in my part, in acquaint you with a fact. At Cambridge I went in for boxing—strong. Since then I've kept in training, and am a professional, you know, I'm apt to prove a trifle nasty."

There was nothing boastful about the tone. It was merely a generous, manly statement of the case, and Joe was one to appreciate it thoroughly. "Good!" he answered. "It's a rare thing, interestin'. I'm glad you ain't no Lizzie-boy, 'cause it wouldn't be no satisfaction in a lammin' of you. The rules of the game is a stand-up give an' take—no wastelin'—no clinchin'. Is that all right?"

"Oh, perfectly," smiled the Englishman, and stood on guard.

The beach was an ideal battleground, smooth and hard, with sufficient room between the waterline and the edge of softer sand. Lord Cranton was stripped and ready for the fray, but now it was the Kentuckian's turn to pause.

"Mister," he said, in a tone of chivalric civility, "I reckon you forgot to take out yo' single-barreled eye-glass, but you better do it, 'cause that's one of the pericklier places that I'm goin' to pick for."

"Thank you," laughed Lord Cranton as he tossed his monocle aside. "I think I'd rather shake your hand than trounce you, but the row is yours and I hope you'll pardon me for doing the best I can. Come on!"

They were ready now for the test of strength and pluck, the nobleman assuming the stiff, ungraceful pose of an English boxer, while his foe crouched low and circled round and round in the manner of his people.

Rupert feinted for an opening, and landed a blow which whistled through the air, but the unexpected rush, swinging was parried and, after a first landing flush upon his mouth; then after a moment Joe sat up, spat blood, and looked with a tone of childish wonder at the man who had hit him.

"One!" smiled the Englishman. "Are you hurt?"

Joe rose in silence and began once more to circle round and round, his gray eyes snapping, his head held high, and his hands held out to protect his jaw. This time he avoided rushing tactics and began to spar. With a double feint he deceived Lord Cranton and placed a blow on the very spot whence the blow he had been removed; but the Briton countered nicely, and, before saying out the tough Kentuckian.

"Have you had enough?" inquired his lordship. "If you have, I am ready with that apology."

"Not much!" Joe answered. "I'm a-goin' to lick you like I said I would, so you better stop talkin' an' watch the game. We've got till supper-time, an' I haven't whipped you then, we'll build a fire to see by the light."

Lord Cranton stared in undisguised amazement. Here was a man outclassed at every point, yet possessed of intrepid grit and an animal strength to accept a triple share of punishment, and not defeat, so long as breath and the power of battle lingered in his frame. To conquer this man he must do so quickly, mercilessly, and toward chest blow dealt with all his muscle and his weight, but Joe withstood it a vicious short-circuiting jolt. The Briton reeled and grew gray with the lashing.

"Neat," he gasped, and once more stood on guard.

Then up and down the smooth white beach the contest raged, each earnest in his work, each striving to batter down the other. The Englishman, in spite of the strange and mutual admiration which grew with the points of contact, was getting far the worst of it. But the Englishman, breathing hard, and even with a Cambridge training, was convinced that the mill would never last till supper time.

The sun poured down with increasing power and the salt sweat rolled from the glistening bodies freely. The Englishman's left eye was in such a state that his monocle would not be placed therein for the space of many days, while Joe was red with a crimson stream that oozed from his mouth and nose. Even their mothers would not have known them then, but, happily, the matrons were spared the unlovely sight.

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He looked at the empty plate, nodded complacently and took a seat.

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The two men fought as their skin-clad forbears battled in the age of stone, fiercely, savagely, each seeking to stun fatally by raw, unartful strength, yet failing because of the other's staccato germ of pluck.

But the end was in sight at last. Joe drew a long, deep breath and gathered his powers for a final, staggering rush, vainly because of the other's staccato germ of pluck.

Lord Cranton watched him coming and tried to raise his guard, but his muscles refused the strain and his arms sank quivering to his sides. His limbs were shaking, wabbling at the knees, and supporting his weight by the force of will alone. He was all in, and knew it, but he did not flinch.

Joe smiled, and set himself for a knockout blow. Before him, undefended, waited the point of a strong, aristocratic jaw. One swing would send his enemy crashing to the beach and wipe away an insult from the slate of pride. And yet there was another way, less brutal, but more complete. The hand shot out—not the hard, doubling fist, but fingers that gripped an unsuspecting body and spun it half around; then Joe proceeded earnestly to kick his lordship—twice.

With a cry of fury Lord Cranton wheeled about, and, with his last remaining ounce of strength, struck viciously at his conqueror's swollen face; then he shivered and sank exhausted on the sand.

He was sleepy now, and seemed to doze away, with the thunder of breakers pounding in his ears, while he dreamed a dream of Bunker and Meju hills. He was beaten—not by skill or courage, but by a brother animal of his own proud fighting blood, an animal hardened in the heat and cold of the western plains, a training unknown at Cambridge, and one which units a man to acknowledge any living master save himself.

When his lordship awoke his first sensations were of heat and cold; the one was a fiery trickle from a flask's neck forced between his teeth; the other a douche of cool, fresh water poured gently from the spout of a coffee pot, and both were vastly pleasing to mildred. He opened his one available eye, while his lips twitched faintly into a twisted smile.

"Jolly old scrimmage, eh? Ripping!" And now concerning that apology—I made of myself no end of a silly ass, and I want to say—

"Aw, you shut up!" commanded Joe, and Lord Cranton laughed.

They were silent for a time, till the bruised Kentuckian spoke again. "Look yonder," he said, as he pointed to a snaky coil of smoke, with a distant, duck-like craft beneath it. "It's that durn fool battleship what run us down, an' if I ain't nosin' off the trail, she's a lookin' for a lord what's lost or strayed!"

"What luck!" observed the Briton solemnly. "I hope, by Jove, she has a surgeon in her crew."